

‘The Saints Belong to Everyone’: LIMINALITY, BELIEF AND PRACTICES IN RURAL NORTH INDIA

Mukesh Kumar

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology Sydney**

April 2019

Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program.

Production Note:

Signature of student: Signature removed prior to publication.

MUKESH KUMAR

Date: 15/04/2019

Dedication

To the Meo peasants, Jogi and Mirasi musicians
and Mewati women,
who are living through difficult times

*‘Bas-ki dushvār hai har kaam kā āsāñ honā
aadmī ko bhī mayassar nahīñ insāñ honā.’*

(Mirza Ghalib)

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the University of Technology, Sydney and to my advisor Professor Devleena Ghosh for the continuous support I received in my PhD study and related research. I particularly thank Professor Ghosh for her patience, motivation and encouragement. Her guidance helped me at all stages of the research and writing of this thesis. Her support within and beyond academic life went far beyond my expectations. My stay with Professor Ghosh and her partner Dr John P. Berwick was extremely fruitful. Comrade John was helpful in so many ways. Over the dinner table and in everyday conversations he not only challenged my crude analysis, preconceived notions and simple reasoning but also taught me much about the 'Aussie way'. Thank you so much, 'mate'.

I also take this opportunity to thank other members of the Berwick family: Mum, Paul, Cindy, Peter, Roch  le and her two sons, Zachary and Sebastien. Their unselfish love, enjoyable company and kind gestures provided me with a home away from home in Sydney. I will always remain grateful to them.

I would also like to thank Dr Christina Ho, my alternate supervisor, as well as Professor Heather Goodall for their insightful comments and encouragement, and for their hard questions, which inspired me to broaden my research to incorporate other perspectives.

This work would not have been possible without the financial support of the Research Council of Norway in the form of an Indian Cosmopolitan Alternatives Ritual Intersections and the Regulation of Religious Offense doctoral dissertation award at the University of Technology, Sydney. I am

immensely indebted to Professor Kathinka Frøystad, the head of the project, who was very supportive of my research and who has actively been engaged both directly and indirectly in mentoring me. My time spent at the University of Oslo from April 2017 to August 2017 as a guest researcher was a formative period for my anthropological pursuits. Under Kathinka's friendship, care and guidance, not only was my stay extremely relaxing, but also her research insights helped me to come out of my 'historical shell' to acquire an anthropological gaze. Kathinka and her partner Roar Høstaker welcomed me into their home, gave me a space to sleep, cooked me food, and took me to the countryside to experience '*Norwegian folkeliv*'. A *tussen tukk* goes to them for all the kindness they showed me.

In Oslo, I also benefitted from conversations with Professor Arild Engelsen Ruud, Professor Claus Peter Zoller, Dr. Pamela Gwyne Price, Moumita Sen and Knut Aukland. I am very thankful to all of them. My friend Siri Bajaaland and her sister's family were always very hospitable to me. Time spent with my Swedish friends in Oslo, Joseph Bejefalk, Victor Junerud, Josefine Alsén, Andreas Jakobsson, and Rasmus Johansson was always full of pleasure. I owe a '*tukk*' to all of them.

I am grateful to all of those with whom I have had the pleasure to work during this project. Two other senior project members, Professor Radhika Chopra and Virginius Xaxa, commented on papers I presented during various project related meetings and conferences. I am grateful to both of them for their insightful input on various aspects of this study. Fellow PhD and post-doctoral researchers and my friends Arnab, Alimpana, Wenche, and Vera were good company during the short time we spent together. I enjoyed our formal and informal conversations and disagreements.

My previous academic mentor, Professor Amar Farooqi, taught me methods and skills of historical research. I am grateful to him for deepening my initial interest in academic research. Professor R.C. Thakran also deserves my deep gratitude for his support on numerous occasions. I also thank shri V.S. Jaggi who has always been very kind and supportive to me.

My sincere thanks also go to my friends Deborah Nixon, Paul Gillen, and Tatum Street whose comments on some of my draft chapters helped me to reframe my research material in a better and succinct manner. Deborah's academic excellence and humorous comments helped me with both my research and everyday life.

At UTS and in Sydney, I thank my friends including Bruno, Ruchira, Bhuva, Caroline, Devaki, Sukhmani, Burcu, Bilquis, Chrisanthi, Naleya, Suman, Pingo, Anne, Marie, Pauline, Manju, Amy, Irwin, who were always a good company. I also thank my friends in Delhi, Bharatpur, JNU, at P.G. Men's hostel: Manish, Saurabh, Aditya, Pushp, Vijay, Gaurav, Rahul, Kunni, Narender, Ajay, Kuldeep, Ramesh, Avidha, Anuj, Deepak, Vinay, Aanchal, Amit, Rajan, Puneet, Chhatra Pal Bhai, Raju Bhai, Dhananjay, Sanjeev, Jatin, Vishal, Kunal, Gagan, Yogesh, RamBhavan, Rajaram, and Pankaj. They were always very supportive, and the enjoyable moments I spent with them remained with me throughout this study.

During my fieldwork in Mewat, I became friends with many people who welcomed me with open arms. My numerous Meo, Jogi, and Mirasi friends were not only invaluable for this research but also won my heart with the warmth of their friendship. I cannot repay their debts in any possible manner. I send my *salaam* to Islamuddin, Adil, Imran, Yusuf, Late Sri Umar Farookh, Shahabuddin, Shahid, late Professor Abdul Ajij, Patwari ji and his family, Tahir, Tushar and others for their kind support and for providing me with every convenience during my stay in Mewat.

Library and staff members of various institutions deserve many thanks for helping me locate research-related sources materials, including the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, NMML Delhi, the National Archives of India, Delhi, the Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner, the Alwar and Bharatpur district Archives, University of Technology Sydney, University of Oslo, The State Library of New South Wales, and the University of Sydney.

I also thank Dr Suzanne Eiggins for her excellent editorial assistance. I am also grateful to Dr Terry Fitzgerald for his comments on two chapters. Staff members in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Graduate Research School at UTS were also always very helpful.

Last but not the least, I offer a special thank you to all my family members, Ma and Pitaji, my brother and sister, and my partner Garima. You always supported me in my worst and best times. As I write this, I am emotional and excited at the same time, hoping to return to *desh* from *pardesh* soon to enjoy your company.

Mukesh Kumar

December 2018

Contents

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	III
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES	IX
A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY	1
ABSTRACT	1
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING PAST AND PRESENT RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENTS.....	3
1.1 The beginning	3
1.2 Mapping the Mewat area throughout its history	10
1.3 Writing the field	20
1.4. Lacunas in theoretical frameworks on religious and cultural interaction	34
1.5 Research methods and fieldwork	43
1.6 The structure of the study	46
CHAPTER 2 CASTE AND RELIGION AMONG MUSLIMS IN MEWAT: PATTERNS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION.....	50
2.1. Social and economic profiles	51
2.2 The issue of caste among Muslims	58
2.3 The <i>jajmāni</i> system	65
2.4 Understanding the Meo peasant status and the question of domination..	70
2.5 The position of the bard castes of the Jogis and Mirasis in the Meo <i>jajmāni</i> system	75
CHAPTER 3 GENEALOGIES OF BELONGING: THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF COMMUNITY, VILLAGE AND FAMILY.....	84
3.1 The relevance of genealogies	85
3.2 Genealogies of Muslim social groups in Mewat.....	87
3.2 Communities and genealogies	91
3.3 The Sufi saint, Shah Chokha, and the village genealogy	112
3.4 Saint Laldas and family genealogy and pedigree	119
CHAPTER 4 RELIGIOUS SYNTHESIS IN THE PAST: THE LALDAS AND SHAH CHOKHA CULTS.....	124
4.1 Bhakti, Sufism and religious interaction.....	127
4.2. The Laldas cult and the interplay of diverse Indic traditions	132
4.3. The Sufi Saint Shah Chokha and popular Islam.....	157

CHAPTER 5 RELIGIOUS INTERACTION AND COMPETITIVE SHARING AROUND SHARED SHRINES.....	172
5.1 Examining processes at shared shrines.....	177
5.2 The Laldas shrines and Hindu–Muslim contestation.....	180
5.3 Muslim intra-religious disputes around the <i>dargāh</i> of Shah Chokha	201
CHAPTER 6 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARYA SAMAJ IN MEWAT	213
6.1 Historical background	213
6.2 The question of Hindu religious crossover for the Arya Samaj	217
6.3 The <i>Shuddhi</i> movement of the Arya Samaj.....	225
6.4 Hindu Jogis, the Arya Samaj and conversion	231
CHAPTER 7 THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT, PROPHETIC MIMESIS AND SHARED SHRINES	237
7.1 Historical background	237
7.2 The Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat	243
7.3 Local non-Islamic practices of <i>shirk</i> and <i>bidāh/bidat</i> in Mewat:.....	247
CHAPTER 8 CONCEALMENT AND SECRECY: HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT	257
8.1 Secrecy and concealment	258
8.2. Ethnographic stories of secrecy and concealment.....	262
8.3 The stories of syncretic beliefs and the secular imaginations of the saints	281
CHAPTER 9 THE ART OF RESISTANCE: THE BARDS’ AND MINSTRELS’ RESPONSE TO ANTI-SYNETIC AND ANTI-LIMINAL IDEOLOGIES	289
9.1 Resistance to domination	291
9.2 Impact on the bard castes of the changing trajectory of the <i>jajmāni</i> system	294
9.3 Experiences of the Jogi and Mirasi castes with Islamic reformism.....	298
9.4 Lost and found: new patronage arrangements.....	304
9.5 New songs of Hindu–Muslim composite heritage	306
CHAPTER 10 POST-LIMINAL-POST-PRESSURE SITUATIONS.....	318
10.1 Overview	318
10.2 The invention of traditions: strategies of Laldas/Khan appropriation as a Hindu figure	321
10.3 The transformations at the <i>dargāh</i> of Shah Chokha.....	335
CHAPTER 11 CONCLUSIONS: LINES IN THE WATER.....	344
REFERENCES	350
1. Archival and primary sources.....	350
2. Published sources.....	351
GLOSSARY	375

List of figures and tables

Figure 1.1: Map showing the location of the Mewat (Nuh) district in the state of Haryana, 2016	11
Figure 1.2: Map of the Haryana area of Mewat (Nuh), 2011	22
Figure 1.3: The Sherpur Shrine of Laldas/Khan at Sherpur Village, Ramgarh, Alwar.....	24
Figure 1.4: The Laldas temple in Saharanpur	26
Figure 1.5: Laldas in interaction with the Mughal prince Dara Shukoh	27
Figure 1.6: The temple of Laldas at Punahana	30
Figure 1.7: The tomb of Shah Chokha at Shah Chokha Village, Punahana, Haryana	31
Figure 1.8: A group of Jogi and Mirasi bards performing at the Laldas shrine, Sherpur	45
Figure 2.1: Population by religious distribution in Nuh (Mewat) District in Haryana, 2011	51
Figure 2.2: The spread of Meo population in the late 19 th century	53
Figure 2.3: The Meo village of Phalaindi, a view from the <i>dargāh</i>	55
Figure 3.1: Two elderly Meo peasants sitting next to their fields	88
Figure 3.2: A renowned group of Jogi and Mirasi musicians and singers	105
Figure 3.3: A bhapang.....	106
Figure 3.4: An inner view of Saint Shah Chokha's grave.....	113
Figure 3.5: The graves of the seven disciples of Shah Chokha, protected by iron grids.....	114
Figure 3.6: A view of Shah Chokha Village from the <i>dargāh</i>	116
Figure 3.7: The <i>sajrā</i> (family pedigree) of Laldas	120
Figure 3.8: The graves of Laldas (top left) and those of his sons, parents and wives (clockwise)	122
Figure 4.1: A typeset version of the text.....	139
Figure 4.2: The meditation place of Laldas on the Aravalli hills.....	141

Figure 4.3: A mosque attached to the place of Laldas's meditation	142
Figure 4.4: The abandoned Mecca Mosque	147
Figure 4.5: Wall-paintings at the Sherpur shrine, showing Laldas surrounded by cows.....	150
Figure 4.6: Muslim and Hindu sādhs of Laldas.....	152
Figure 4.7: Ruksana, a female Laldas sādih.....	154
Figure 4.8: The current Muslim sādih performing ārti at the Sherpur shrine	155
Figure 4.9: White sheets offered to Laldas (top right), a visitor carrying sheets (top right), and a Sayyed's tomb with the green sheet (lower left and right) ...	156
Figure 5.1: Two back views of the Sherpur Shrine.....	181
Figure 5.2: Decommissioned mosque at the Laldas shrine (left), with the kuccha houses of the Muslim sādhs (right)	182
Figure 5.3: The Dholidoob Shrine of Laldas	183
Figure 5.4: A news report about the dispute, 1946, by the Dawn newspaper ..	185
Figure 5.5: Ritual activities in the main sanctum.....	202
Figure 5.6: Children at the <i>madrassā</i> in Shah Chokha <i>dargāh</i>	203
Figure 5.7: The head Maulavi (lying) with two villagers	204
Figure 5.8: Saiket (left) and Maqbul Khan (right) at the Shah Chokha <i>dargāh</i> ..	205
Figure 6.1 Laldas temple in the premise of the Arya Samaj in Punahana	218
Figure 6.3 The temple of Jaharpīr	220
Figure 6.4: A meeting of the Shuddhi Jogis.....	226
Figure 6.5: Roshanlal Nath Ji, sitting on his charpoy	227
Figure 6.6: An idol sitting in lotus position and symbolising a Jogi samādhi ..	230
Figure 7.1: A Tablighi group on tour standing in front of the <i>dargāh</i> of Shah Chokha.....	246
Figure 7.2: The usual gathering at the shop in front of my landlord's house ...	249
Figure 8.1: Ahmad in the premises of Shah Chokha tomb	264
Figure 8.2: From right to left: Fatima, Fatima's husband, and Rabiya and her children.....	270
Figure 8.3: Shiv Shankar Singla at his shop.....	279
Figure 8.4: Dinesh's family at the <i>dargāh</i> for their child's head shaving ceremony	285
Figure 9.1: Ustād Rammal Khan in his house	302

Figure 9.2: The newspaper cutting of Farookh's interview	307
Figure 9.3: Yusuf (standing) with his father Umar Farookh (right).....	310
Figure 10.1: The Temple of Punahana.....	322
Figure 10.2: Various temple idols of Laldas with turbans	324
Figure 10.3: Newly published booklets and pamphlets about Laldas	326
Figure 10.4: Laldas shobhā yātrā—a pagent for Saint Laldas.....	328
Figure 10.5 The <i>dargāh</i> of Shah Chokha's main entrance gate (on the south side) in the outer wall.....	336
Figure 10.6 One of the mosques in the <i>dargāh</i> between the tomb and grain stores	337
Figure 10.7: A newly installed iron gate at the <i>dargāh</i> of Shah Chokha	338
Figure 10.8: A clean-up of the courtyard by Tablighi workers and the students from the <i>madrassā</i>	339

A note on terminology

In this thesis, most Hindi, Urdu, and Mewati terms are italicised and diacritics are used to emphasise their pronunciation for English readers. However, the names of places, persons, castes, sects, linages and saints are not italicised, and no diacritic marks are used, for instance, Laldas, Shah Chokha, Ram, Krishna, Meo, Jogi, Fakir etc. Similarly, conceptual themes such as Bhakti and Sufi as well as famous texts and objects such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Quran appear in plain font in their typical spelling in English texts. Non-English compound words used as nouns follow the same rule. I have followed these principles throughout, with the exception of popular sayings, songs and statements, when the terms are being used with a different meaning than previously encountered in the text or where they may be difficult to understand even for a native speaker. ■

Abstract

Mewat is a cultural region in north India with a predominantly Meo Muslim population. Historically, the interaction of Hindu, Muslim and other religious groups has given the sharing of the region's many shrines of Bhakti and Sufi saints a pluralistic character. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, these shared shrines and their saints reflected the world of middle-caste/class Meo Muslim peasants upon whom various service castes were dependent under the *jajmāni* (patron–client system). The Meos' devotion to these saints was in line with the Bhakti and Sufi ideas that advocated the transcendence of caste and religious identities in favour of peasant values and devotional requirements.

However, the rise of nationalist and reform politics at the national level in the 20th century and its extension to Mewat led people to identify themselves as more Hindu or Muslim. In this thesis I explore the malleable nature of these religious boundaries and identities by tracing the history of two shared shrines of the 16th century Bhakti and Sufi saints, Laldas and Shah Chokha. I used ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with Hindu and Muslim individuals, as well as Meo oral folktales and folksongs performed by the Jogi and Mirasi bards and archival methods to explore the pre and post-religious reform eras.

Based on this data I argue that the Hindu and Islamic reform movements, the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat respectively, came to define religious identity and practices in Mewat from the beginning of the 20th century. The Tablighi Jamaat movement led Meos to see themselves as a Sunni Muslim group, a change that unsettled traditionally shared religious sites and practices and created both visible and invisible threats for Muslim individuals and

groups who were still engaged in what most Meos considered as un-Islamic practices. In response, the more powerless social groups such as Meo and other Muslim women and the bards and minstrels of Jogi and Mirasi caste backgrounds responded with passive resistance.

In this study, I demonstrate that the contestation of previously shared religious sites is deeply rooted in the changing forms of the religious cultures among social-religious groups. The significance of this study is to show how, in the wake of religious reform, separatism and disputes, symbolic aspects of shared shrines undergo religious transformations, while marginalised groups employ strategies of passive resistance to maintain the expression of their shared faiths and beliefs. ■
